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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the techniques used in a successful, intensive course in introductory Russian. The objectives of the course are to develop good pronunciation and oral communication skills, good listening comprehension skills, some fluency in reading, and some elementary skill in writing. The course relies upon the development of a community feeling, lessened inhibitions, physical contact, and individual student participation. The grading system is designed to foster optimum participation and performance on the part of the student. (AM)

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Some Aspects of the Teaching of an Intensive Course in Russian at Brown University

Barbara Monahan

The Intensive Russian course, which I started at Brown in 1972, covers two years of Russian language study in one.

The aims of the course, in order of importance, are the following:

1. To develop aural comprehension skill to the point where the student understands immediately and without the interference of internal translation 80 to 90 percent of all utterances at normal conversation speed. Nearly all the utterances are based on material in the Ben Clark text, Russian for Americans.

2. To build up a necessarily limited facility to reproduce accurately and with correct intonation patterns all items of communication used in the classroom and about 90 percent of those used in the Clark text. These items, of course, overlap in many areas.

3. To develop some fluency in reading and the ability to comprehend fairly difficult material without the aid of a dictionary. Under the heading "fairly difficult" I include the last six chapters of the Clark text and the story "Domik na bolote".

4. To acquire some elementary skill in writing, using the structures studied in the Clark text and drilled orally in class.

In order to achieve these four general aims, I have from the very beginning relied on a few simple procedures which have withstood the test of time. Briefly, they are these:

A development of a feeling of group cohesiveness. In order to achieve this goal, I begin on the first day of classes to eliminate shyness and inhibitions and put everyone on an equal

footing by what one of my former students labels "terror tactics". These "terror tactics" involve elements of culture shock not characteristic of the American classroom.

The first element is physical contact. This includes antics such as lifting a student's arm or leg in order to introduce the words "ruka, noga" and holding it long enough for class members to understand immediately what "ruka, noga" mean. It involves lightly grasping a student's ear and/or nose to introduce vowel sounds. With another student it involves lifting and showing fingers, so that although no explanation of phonetics has yet been given, the group is forced to hear and to repeat an item with a palatalized sound. Since each student is "assaulted" physically, each knows that he or she may be next in line, and my constant moving at random from one student to another allows for no wandering of attention.

Part of this element of physical contact is the invasion of space that is so unexpected in an American classroom. This infringement of the social code allows me to catch immediately any errors in pronunciation that I cannot detect while the group is reciting chorally. More importantly, it gives me an opportunity to show each student that his contribution is important both to the group as a whole and to me personally. It allows me to gain the confidence of each student and prevent any inhibitions from arising later when there will be more complicated individual performances demanded. The student knows from the first day of classes that the learning process is to take place in an atmosphere which provides group support and although the students are unaware of it immediately, there will be repeated reinforcements of the group cohesiveness

throughout the year to maintain what is established during the first week.

By means of the procedures I have just outlined, i.e., use of physical contact, invasion of space, and elimination of translation I have found that I am able to teach in an amazingly short time, although superficially at first a rather large number of vocabulary items and at least two concepts: number and gender.

As each individual is confronted with my grabbing his head, nose, pen or whatever personal item is easily accessible, he absorbs immediately and with no translation items such as "nos", "ruka", "noga", "rot", "ukho", "zuby", "shtany", "pal'tsy", "palets", "ruchki" and so forth.

As each student undergoes this terrifying experience, he reproduces what he or she hears and because all the items involve the student directly and pertain to his personal possessions, the phonetic elements involved, along with the vocabulary items themselves, are grasped surprisingly quickly.

Since all of the units of communication dealt with in the first two or three weeks of study involve the student and his immediate world, they are of the utmost importance to him or her. This is the factor that rivets the student's attention on the segment he is learning to manipulate.

By the time every class member, ten or twelve in all, has been confronted with an experience in hearing, understanding and reproducing approximately twenty items dealing with the immediate environment, there is still quite a bit of dazed confusion and uncertainty, but there is also a growing albeit dim perception of the

communicative process now beginning to function.

As soon as the group has had sufficient exposure to and practice with the items which are basic to any further work, I begin to explain and use the intonation patterns $1K^1$ and $1K^2$. This is usually done in the third class hour of the first week and from the beginning I stress the importance of these patterns as an integral part of communication and not something to be studied simply for theoretical value.

To begin this exercise, I use the items the students already know, but pose for each one the question "cto eto"? using $1K^2$. To this each student must answer using $1K^1$ combined with the words previously drilled.

For example I may say to a student pointing to his hand, "Cto eto?" To which the student must respond using $1K^1$, "Eto ruka." After choral and individual recitations of about twenty such items in a very rapid tempo, I then give the rest of the exercise over to the group while I stand by as prompter and corrector.

In this portion of the hour, the students do two things. They learn to handle both intonation patterns, and they learn something about contemporary Soviet life by being forced to work with the actual physical objects that are a part of this life.

Briefly the experience works as follows. Each student is given one item, the name of which he must remember. The items given are znacki, avos'ka, avos'ki, jajco, jajca, caj, krasnyj platok, kopejka, kopejki, rubli, dollar, dollary, ogurec, pomidory, vodka. Where necessary, I, or preferably some student who knows, explain the meaning of avos'ka and its place in the Soviet world,

as I do with krasnyj platok. After this explanation, there is no more use of English.

At this point perhaps I should digress to add that from the very first day English is used only for brief grammar explanations and only in the first semester.

All of the procedures I have just described occupy the whole first week, a total of nine hours, sometimes spilling over into the second week if the group contains more than twelve members.

On the last day of the first week, for those who have survived the devastating experience, there is an introduction to Russian vodka, stolicnaja, and a song session. After a brief explanation--in Russian--of what is about to occur, all class members sample vodka, the toast with raised bokaly having been given to "nashe zdorov'e" and then we have our first Friday afternoon song session. The song is Pust' vcegda budet solnce, the translation of which produces some inhibited giggles.

Despite the inhibitions, everyone agrees to the game and prodded by my loud if not pleasing voice, the students do manage to wrap their tongues around palatalized t's, d's and voiceless v's.

Since there is always at least one student in the group who will take the lead, this personality usually emerges during the first song session and invariably becomes both a peer tutor and a great help in allowing weaker students to overcome their initial shyness.

At the end of the first 13 or 14 hours, the students are given a sound discrimination test. They are asked to distinguish between such sounds as ugol-ugol', pol'ka-polka, nosi-nosy, vodi-vody, for

example. They are also asked to decide whether a given utterance is a question or a sentence. Although this seems simple at first glance, in reality it is somewhat more complicated, since by this time students have been exposed to and asked to reproduce $1K^3$ in addition to $1K^1$ and $1K^2$.

Interestingly enough, in the five years I have been teaching this course, there have been four failures on this first quiz and all four students have either dropped the course or requested a grade of S/NC.

Failure on this or any other quiz means a grade of less than 60 percent, and students are told before this first quiz that only two rules apply to every quiz. Rule 1 is that no item is ever repeated. Rule 2 is that each student must achieve at least 80 percent on every quiz, although not necessarily the first time around.

Since nearly all students receive 80 or 90 percent on the first quiz, the result is a feeling of satisfaction and success that creates a kind of psychological cushion for the more difficult work that lies ahead.

If it happens that a student receives less than 80 percent on this or any other quiz, then I remind him or her that alternate quizzes on the same material are available and that the quiz must be re-done until a grade of 80 percent is achieved.

If a given student re-takes one or several quizzes on the same material and still fails to achieve the necessary 80 percent, then we have a talk about his or her work in which I usually attempt to persuade the student to transfer out of the intensive course into the "normal" Russian I course.

If the student prefers to remain in intensive--this is usually the student with masochistic tendencies--then I ask him or her to revise the grade option downward or change it to S/NC. The decision is to be based on the student's goals, interests and--what is hardest of all to define and accept--his or her limitations.

So far everything I am doing seems to be leading in the direction of written contracts. Since this is so, I plan to initiate this system next year, as it seems to work quite well in the third-year course. The contract agreement I have worked out is as follows:

To achieve a grade of A, a student must receive 90 percent or more on every quiz, of which there are about ten each semester. He or she must also write without errors all the exercises in the Clark text that are assigned each day to reinforce the grasp of the material covered. In addition, the student must write with only very minor errors short "socinenija" that I begin to assign usually in December. These take the form of letters home complaining about the work involved in intensive Russian, descriptions of life at Brown involving practice with verbs like *izucat'*, *ucit'sja*, *ucit'* and in general a rather comprehensive review of the basic grammatical structures studied during the first three months.

The last requirement for obtaining a grade of A is to listen to and absorb the material on the tapes which accompany the Clark text. This is simply another way of assimilating the material presented in the textbook and a means of insuring that the student takes advantage of an oral presentation of material that may be touched on only superficially in class because of the time factor.

For the student who finds 9 or 10 hours of class work, plus

the required written and lab assignments, as much or more than he or she can handle, a grade of B is the most realistic option, although most students are reluctant to choose this option. Depending upon the particular student's objectives, the student and I together will scale down his work load, usually in the area of written assignments. The rule of 80 percent as a passing grade still applies when such options are used.

For the student choosing a grade option of S/NC--and such students are becoming increasingly fewer--there is a further scaling down of requirements and for these students a grade of 70 percent on the semester exams is considered passing.

Although the student is usually unaware of it at first, he or she must--even to receive a final grade of S--have a fairly good grasp of all material covered, since the rule of 80 percent equals passing applies to all quizzes regardless of the grade option. This means that although many of the exercises in the Clark text may be ignored, the student is still developing the ability to understand at least 80 percent of what he hears, almost, one might say, in spite of himself.

Perhaps I should mention, for purposes of clarification, why I decided five years ago on the goal of 80 percent as a passing grade. I find that it accomplishes two things: it forces the student to listen attentively. Knowing that any given utterance will be said only once, the student, who invariably wants to perform well and save himself the time and bother of repeating the quiz, makes a very concentrated effort to follow what is being said. The second thing that happens, which is a by-product of the first,

is that the student tries to grasp the meaning of the entire phrase, although there may be one or two elements in it which he does not completely understand. Gradually, through repetitions of this process both on quizzes and during regular class sessions, the student begins to understand that he or she can indeed comprehend a great deal without knowing the meaning of every component item and, with constant reminding, the student can finally accept the necessary tolerance for vagueness that is a prerequisite for more complicated work, particularly in the development of reading ability.

By about the end of the second week of the first semester, the group is ready to begin work with the *Clerk* text.

I shall try to describe very briefly the general format for the instruction. At the beginning of each hour, a maximum of fifteen minutes is devoted to explanation in English of the material to be studied that day. When the group has understood the process involved, we begin immediately to use the grammatical principle involved in as many contexts as possible. As soon as I see that the pattern has been established, I re-introduce the principle in a context of unfamiliar words, i.e. words that have been heard on the tapes but not actively reproduced.

At first I am a sort of theatrical director orchestrating the various responses of the group. As I see that the group has approached the point where now individual members can assume my role, I turn the exercise session over to the class and prompt and correct as needed.

Does this system I have outlined achieve any results? Briefly I shall make two comments. One of the most repeated phrases after

class is, "Is it already time to go?" Comment #2 is that about 90 percent ~~plus~~ of this group goes on to further Russian language study.

And finally, I should like to conclude this paper with the observation that two years ago, I stopped using the standardized texts put out by the Educational Testing Service and geared to students who have had two years of Russian study since the test scores were too high to be valid and meaningful.

Although there does seem to be some real fright during the first two weeks of exposure to my "terror tactics", the end does seem to justify the means and a good part of that end result I attribute to the very useful material in the Clark text, which allows the student to begin immediately to study Russian as a vital means of communication.